

Commentary

Education Policy Implications from the Expert Panel on Electronic Media and Youth Violence

Maria R. Worthen, M.S.W.*

U.S. Department of Education, Washington, DC

Abstract

The research from the Expert Panel on Electronic Media and Youth Violence makes a compelling case for why educators and education policymakers should care about the effects of media on youth behavior, and the growing phenomenon of Internet bullying and harassment. The ability of the U.S. education system to respond is limited not only by competing instructional priorities but also by the governance structure of the education system itself. The federal role is limited to a proportionally small amount of funding for states and schools, to raising public awareness, and to providing research and data. States can set priorities, make requirements, and direct funding. Districts and schools ultimately have the most control over prevention program selection and setting social and behavioral norms. Key implications of the panel's research for educators and education policymakers include:

- Internet bullying is correlated with school behavior problems.
- Internet bullying behavior may peak in middle school.
- Internet bullying shares common predictors with verbal and, to some extent, physical bullying.
- Media literacy programs may mitigate the negative effects of electronic media on youth.

Specific recommendations based on these conclusions are discussed, and research priorities for the prevention and education fields are identified. © 2007 Society for Adolescent Medicine. All rights reserved.

Electronic media and youth violence is a broad field of study, as demonstrated by the research of this panel. Although cyberbullying has been most in the headlines lately as a new phenomenon, one thing that the research from the expert panel makes clear is the myriad of ways that electronic media affect youth—and also how youth are having an effect on electronic media.

One area of research on electronic media and youth violence that does have a significant body of literature is the causal relationship of exposure to violence in movies, television, video games, and the Internet on children [1,2]. With such a robust body of research on exposure to television and

video game violence, the panel has largely focused its attentions on the emerging study of Internet bullying and harassment.

Bullying and Harassment: From the Schoolyard to Cyberspace

Educators must play many roles to meet both the needs of their students and satisfy administrative and policy requirements. Recent education policy (the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965* as amended by the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*) has tended toward a “back-to-basics” approach, with a greater emphasis on math and reading proficiency. Without a solid foundation for these basic skills in their earliest years of education, students will have a difficult time acquiring the skills needed in an increasingly global marketplace, and the United States will be

*Address correspondence to: Maria R. Worthen, M.S.W., U.S. Department of Education, 400 Maryland Ave. SW, Room 3W225, Washington, DC 20202-6200.

E-mail address: Maria.Worthen@ed.gov

less able to continue its role as a leader in the global marketplace. Nonetheless, students bring to the classroom not only developing minds but also the vulnerabilities of the developing psyche. Unfortunately, many students face a variety of barriers to learning each day at school. Feeling anxious, unsafe, or unable to focus can be precipitated by a myriad of factors coming from home life, the environment at school, events in the community, hunger, and mental health disturbances.

Instead of waiting for problems to develop, prevention programs can stop them from occurring—or mitigate their effects. Prevention is more cost-effective (financially and emotionally) than reacting to negative events or behaviors after they happen. Knowing more about the characteristics and predictors of Internet bullying and harassment can inform the approach of a prevention program. More information about the consequences of bullying and harassment on individual lives, academic achievement, and the school environment may help educators identify the cause of behavioral or academic difficulties. Sharing this information with school administrators, colleagues, and potential prevention program funding sources can help to make the case for implementing a bullying prevention program.

Key Implications for Educators and Policymakers

Internet harassment has a negative effect on victims' classroom behavior

The finding that there may be an association between Internet bullying, victimization, and behavior problems [3] is significant. Although more research should be done to corroborate this finding, educators should be aware of Internet harassment as a possible cause of classroom disruptions that take away from instruction time.

Internet bullying may peak during middle school

Educators should be aware of the relationship of grade level to bullying incidence to best target prevention efforts. Preliminary evidence seems to indicate that Internet bullying peaks during middle school. For example, Williams and Guerra [4] found that both verbal and Internet bullying rose sharply after fifth grade, peaking in eighth grade, and falling off a little in subsequent years.

Internet bullying shares common predictors with "real life" forms of bullying

Williams and Guerra [4] also found that three different forms of bullying—Internet, verbal, and physical—all share common predictors. This is perhaps the most important implication for educators wishing to prevent bullying—if these preliminary findings show that all forms of bullying share the same predictors, then it may be plausible that a single bullying prevention program, targeted at these com-

mon predictors, could impact the prevalence of these three distinct forms of bullying.

Media literacy programs may mitigate the negative effects of electronic media on youth

Wolak et al [5] make the case for media literacy training for students, teachers, and educators, arguing that an awareness of some of the pitfalls of Internet use would help reduce distressing situations and behavior. Because most electronic bullying and harassment occur out of school [3], and youth are most exposed to media violence after school, media literacy programs [5] can give youth the knowledge and skills to make smart decisions about Internet use and to be critical of the violence they see in the media.

Implications for Education Policy

Before determining the role educators should play in acting on the implications of the panel's research, it is necessary to understand the capacity and limitations of the different levels of the U.S. education system.

The role of the federal government

The federal government must generally play a limited role in most local education matters. In fact, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) is expressly prohibited by statute from exercising "any direction, supervision, or control over the curriculum, program of instruction, administration, or personnel of any educational institution, school or school system, or over the selection of library resources, textbooks, or other printed or published instructional materials . . ." [6]. Through the Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, ED collaborates with other federal agencies to raise awareness about current issues, provide training to school prevention coordinators, and distribute funding for violence prevention. ED provides direct support to state education agencies (SEAs) and governors through the *Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act (SDFSCA)* State Grants program. Local education agencies (LEAs) can also receive direct assistance from ED through the *SDFSCA* State Grants and through discretionary grant programs such as Safe Schools/Healthy Students.

The role of SEAs

SEAs play a key role in directing funding and priorities. Each SEA can adopt its own prevention strategy, which may fit within a broader learning supports framework. Although states must collect and report data on a limited number of school violence indicators, SEAs have a great deal of discretion in determining the data elements that will be collected for assessment and surveillance. Therefore, if a state identifies electronic media and youth violence as an area of concern, it may incorporate prevalence measures of victimization and perpetration of Internet bullying and harassment into its data collections.

An increasing number of states are requiring the development of antibullying policies. There is little information about the development, implementation, or effectiveness of such policies, but LEAs that are required to do so may wish to expand definitions of bullying to include the Internet and other electronic media.

The role of LEAs and schools

Within the education system, schools and districts can play the biggest role in addressing youth violence and negative behavior—electronic or otherwise. Districts can use federal, state, and local funding (as allowable) to support bullying and harassment prevention and media literacy programs. Using *SDFSCA* funds that are subgranted to them through the SEA and the governor's office, LEAs may select evidence-based programs that address prevention of issues that are identified through needs assessments. Although prevention programs address a variety of factors that contribute to violent behavior, some states have also passed legislation or established regulations to regulate school Internet use or provide consequences for electronic violence.

Schools and districts should conduct regular needs assessments by collecting data on youth behavior and school environment to make the case for and guide prevention program selection. For specific guidance on developing a comprehensive approach to school health and safety, schools may wish to look to the Centers for Disease Control's School Health Guidelines to Prevent Unintentional Injuries, Violence, and Suicide [7].

Discussion

Educators should be aware of the effect that violence, bullying, and harassment can have on children's well being, including behavior and academic achievement. As the research of this expert panel shows, educators should be concerned about the issue of electronic media in the lives of their students. Electronic media play an important role in the way most youth communicate with each other—social networking sites, e-mail, cell phones, instant messaging, and text messaging can play integral roles in youth communication and recreation. Television is a constant presence in most youths' lives and not just outside of school. Most schools use television or video programming as an instructional tool, and therefore have a responsibility to guide students in the thoughtful consumption of electronic media.

Schools should focus on preventing bullying and harassment by promoting a school culture that does not tolerate such behavior. Schools should also promote media literacy so that youth can view the unavoidable presence of violence in the media with a critical eye. Educators themselves will need to become more tech-savvy, familiarizing themselves

with the most popular means of electronic interaction used by students. Two ways to do this include exploring social networking sites and establishing a dialogue with students about their electronic media habits.

Given the common predictors shared by electronic and in-person forms of bullying and harassment, schools should implement or continue to implement known effective prevention programs that acknowledge the role of technology, and also employ the communication methods that youth are more likely to use (i.e., using text messages to send messages to program participants). However, Ybarra and Leaf's [3] finding that the majority of Internet bullying victims are not bullied at school may imply that there is an invisible population of children that are at risk for victimization. Further research is needed to gauge the prevalence and significance of this finding.

Research priorities for education should include more knowledge about best practices for preventing electronic bullying/harassment, and for mitigating the effects of media violence. The data presented by this panel have important implications for practice; therefore, it is important to keep in mind the limitations of the quasi- or nonexperimental methods used in some studies. At the same time, we must acknowledge the necessity of using quick turnaround survey mechanisms to stay informed of quickly evolving youth technology use. The prevention and education fields should commit themselves to agreeing on common definitions and instruments—and more investigation into innovative but reliable forms of survey methodology. Finally, the panel made little mention of the use of technology in courtship violence, and gender- and sexuality-related harassment. This is an area of concern to many youth, parents, and educators, and one that should be addressed by prevention researchers.

References

- [1] Slaby RG. Media violence: effects and potential remedies. In: Katzmann G, ed. *Securing our Children's Future: New Approaches to Juvenile Justice and Youth Violence*. Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 2002:305–37.
- [2] Huesmann LR. The impact of electronic media violence: scientific theory and research. *J Adolesc Health* 2007;41(suppl):S6–S13.
- [3] Ybarra ML, Diener-West M, Leaf PJ. Examining the overlap in internet harassment and school bullying: implications for school intervention. *J Adolesc Health* 2007;41(suppl):S42–S50.
- [4] Williams KR, Guerra NG. Prevalence and predictors of internet bullying. *J Adolesc Health* 2007;41(suppl):S14–S21.
- [5] Wolak J, Mitchell KJ, Finkelhor D. Does online harassment constitute bullying? An exploration of online harassment by known peers and online-only contacts. *J Adolesc Health* 2007;41(suppl):S51–8.
- [6] The General Education Provisions Act, as amended by the Improving America's Schools Act: 20 U.S.C. 1232a.
- [7] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. School health guidelines to prevent unintentional injuries and violence. *MMWR* 2001;50(No. RR-22).